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For Troops' Families, a Chance to Bond

Share information at Huntington forum

By Dawn MacKeen
STAFF WRITER

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Liz and John Denes came to the Veterans of Foreign Wars building in Huntington Station yesterday morning to not feel alone anymore.

Their neighbors don't know what it's like to have a 23-year-old son serving in the Persian Gulf. So most of the time, they don't say anything at all. "It's very isolating," said Liz Denes of Ronkonkoma. "It's almost like when someone dies, and they are afraid they are going to upset you."

Only the families of the deployed understand, she said, and here they were, dozens of them, attending a forum by Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington). During the two-hour meeting, they exchanged information with one another, and listened to Israel and representatives from the military inform them about what they are entitled to, such as protection from creditors and foreclosures.

"Many of the families of active military are not only up against loneliness, they are also up against red tape, creditors and bureaucracy," Israel said. He also stressed the importance of supporting the troops not only when they're fighting, but also once they return home. Israel denounced the House of Representatives' recent \$14-billion cut to veterans programs over the next decade.

Like others in attendance, Heidi and Pierre Sylvestre of Setauket said they were caught in red tape involving their son, John Pierre Sylvestre, 26, who left Astoria in mid-February for Iraq. They just received two packages from their son's roommate stuffed with bills. When they called one company to say the Marine reservist was on active duty in Iraq, they were told: Pay it or it will be submitted to a collection agency. "It wasn't something that I thought for a moment that I would have to deal with," Heidi Sylvestre said. "And I think there's enough to worry about - his life, and the status of this country."

As soon as she sat down, another parent stood up and recounted a similar tale, of his son's unpaid parking ticket. A retired Army general, Anthony R. Kropp, quipped soon thereafter, "How do you make payments when you're in a Humvee?" A rare moment of laughter followed.

Others expressed concern about their children's whereabouts. Many arrived wearing yellow ribbon pins, clutching photos of them in uniform. One woman, Joann of Kings Park, didn't want her last name used because she was worried someone might prank-call her and tell her that her son Joseph, a 23-year-old Marine, had died. "I'm going through enough as it is," she said. "I don't need that, too."

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